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SUBJECT: CODEL SPECTER MEETS WITH SYRIAN PRESIDENT BASHAR AL-ASAD

Classified By: Classified by CDA Todd Holmstrom for reasons 1.4 b and d

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¶11. (C) SUMMARY: President Bashar Al-Asad said he was optimistic about restarting peace negotiations with Israel, claimed (erroneously it appears) the seven opposition activists recently jailed had been released, expressed pessimism on reaching a political resolution in Lebanon given what he described as the growing differences among the parties, and defended Iran's right to retain its civilian nuclear program, all in the course of a meeting with Senator Arlen Specter and Representative Patrick Kennedy. They also discussed the release of Israeli prisoners held by Hamas and Hezbollah, the relocation of the U.S. Embassy compound, and the processing of Iraqi refugees for immigration to the United States. END SUMMARY.

¶12. (U) On December 30, Syrian President Bashar Al-Asad met for 60 minutes with Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) and Representative Patrick Kennedy (D-RI). Asad warmly welcomed the U.S. congressmen, remembering the many times he and the Senator met in the past. Foreign Minister Walid Muallem also attended the meeting. The Charg d'Affaires and an Embassy notetaker attended at the delegation's request.

The Messages: Olmert is Willing to Find a Way, Bush Can Help

¶13. (C) Specter opened the meeting by telling Asad "Olmert wants to find a way" to promote peace on the Syria-Israel track. Specter said Olmert's leak to the media was a message itself of Olmert's willingness to pursue peace with Syria. (Note: Damascus has been following closely the Israeli press statements on a message Specter would supposedly be carrying to Asad from PM Olmert on restarting the peace process. End note.) Specter commented that Asad would be wise to take advantage of the perishable opportunity of engagement that the post-Annapolis environment offered Syria. In response to a query from Asad, Specter opined that the willingness of President Bush to take on a greater role in the Middle East peace process was directly proportional to the likelihood of success -- which made it imperative for Asad to take positive action now to allow further progress if he were truly interested in peace. Specter stressed, however, the parties themselves must find their own answers.

¶14. (C) Asad commented to Specter that had they met two months ago he would have told the Senator no progress was possible until a new U.S. administration took office. Asad, however, termed his post-Annapolis mood as "optimistic" and was pleased by Senator Specter's comments on Israeli Prime Minister Olmert's openness to re-starting the Syria-Israel track and on President Bush's willingness to take on a larger

role in the Middle East peace process. Outlining a plan laid out the night before to Specter by FM Muallem (septel), Asad identified three necessary phases to pursuing a peace treaty with Israel.

-- First, Israel needs to commit to a complete withdrawal from the Golan once a peace treaty is signed.

-- Second, Turkey would act as a mediator between Israel and Syria with the goal of attaining guarantees on border and security issues. Asad indicated that Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan was already playing a mediator role between Israel and Syria since May 2007.

-- Third, the United States would then sponsor direct negotiations between Syrians and Israelis sitting at the same table.

Asad was adamant about the critical role the United States must play in bringing Syria and Israel to the negotiating table, and keeping them there. Specter promised to report Asad's positive response and their discussion to both PM Olmert and President Bush.

Release of National Council Members Promised

¶ 15. (C) Interjecting the subject of human rights, Kennedy pressed Asad on the jailing of opposition activists from the recently formed Damascus Declaration National Council. Asad said individual members of the opposition were held briefly for investigation, but were not jailed as Syrians could only be arrested if they "had violated Syrian law." Asad claimed

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all of the National Council members previously detained had been released. He stressed internal criticism of the government was permitted in Syria; only "contacts with foreign powers" would be severely punished. FM Muallem confirmed the releases, stating he had personally looked into the cases after Congressman Kennedy raised the issue with him the night before (septel). He asked the Congressman to pass through the Embassy the names of anyone he believed were still in custody. (Note: Embassy passed the seven names the same afternoon, but no contact has been able to confirm the seven detainees' release. End note.)

¶ 16. (C) On the subject of reform, Asad stressed his belief in "development, culture, and dialogue", especially economic development, as the prerequisite for political change. According to Asad, he had modified his plans for political reform now that Syria found itself between a sectarian political crisis in Lebanon and a second sectarian conflict in Iraq. In these circumstances, he said, Syria must take a different approach toward democracy. Asad said Syria was not perfect, but it was moving forward, albeit at a slower pace than before. Results may not be achieved in this generation, warned Asad.

In Lebanon, Failure or Success in Syria's Hands

¶ 17. (C) Raising the issue twice during the course of the discussion, Specter and Kennedy told Asad, "rightly or wrongly," Syria would be blamed for the continuing political impasse and/or any associated violence in Lebanon. Asad replied Syria had been working with the French to see a President elected, but the gap between the parties remained very wide and an agreement, if reached, "may not be enough." Asad asserted the parties were previously close to an agreement, but the visit of Assistant Secretary Welch and Deputy National Security Advisor Abrams set negotiations "back to zero."

¶18. (C) Turning to Iran, Specter pressed Asad to use his influence with the Iranians to convince them to accept the Putin compromise whereby Russia would conduct uranium enrichment for Iran. Asad argued Iran had a right under international law to pursue a non-military nuclear program and it was cooperating fully with the IAEA. According to Asad, IAEA inspections of Iranian enrichment and associated activities was the only viable option. Asad urged direct U.S. dialogue with the Iranians to help solve the current crisis. Specter commented he had a long-pending request to visit Tehran, which remained unanswered. Asad promised to encourage the Iranians to approve a visit. Specter also asked Asad to host a meeting between Iranian and American parliamentarians if a visit to Tehran was impossible.

¶19. (C) Asad said intelligence cooperation could only be resumed once Washington re-engages the SARG on a policy level. Like FM Muallem (septel), Asad complained bitterly about American "hostility" toward Syria. According to Asad, evidence of U.S. ill-intentions toward Syria included the absence of an U.S. ambassador in Syria and President Bush's comment during an end-of-year press conference that he had long ago lost patience with the Syrian regime.

¶10. (C) Asad said Egypt was playing a positive role in efforts to secure the release of the Israeli soldier held by Hamas in Gaza, and Egypt preferred to work on the issue alone. Regarding the soldiers held by Hezbollah, Asad said he had spoken with Hezbollah and encouraged its leadership to find a way to return the soldiers. Hezbollah was waiting for an Israeli proposal on a prisoner exchange before returning the Israelis, according to Asad. Hezbollah, said Asad, was ready to make a deal. And, Syria remained ready to take any Israeli proposal to Hezbollah. Regarding the whereabouts of Ron Arad, Asad said Hezbollah could not find him and no one knew where he was or what had happened to him. He added, however, if Hezbollah found Arad, they would use him as part of a prisoner exchange

Embassy Relocation

¶11. (C) Following up on Asad's commitment to respond

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positively to U.S. Embassy security needs, made to Specter during their December 2006 meeting, Specter asked about the long-pending relocation of the U.S. Embassy to a proposed diplomatic compound in a Damascus suburb. (Note: the project has not progressed since 2002. End Note.) After conferring with FM Muallem, Asad said the Syrian government needed an additional year to build the necessary infrastructure. Asad regretted the delay, which he attributed to "bureaucracy", but made no further promises on the subject.

¶12. (U) Codel Specter did not clear this cable.
HOLMSTROM